

# ANALYZING TEXT FEATURES TO DETERMINE LEVELS

Have you ever as an adult reread a book you'd read in junior high or high school? For example, perhaps you read *Middlemarch* (Eliot 1871, 1996)<sup>1</sup> in your high school senior English class. Your teacher may have attempted to increase your understanding through lecture or discussion, or presented her own interpretation of the book. But the nuances of this work of literature might be clearer after much more "life experience." You would recognize Dorothea's passionate commitment to intellectual ideas, unusual for a woman of her times. While your reading as a high school senior may have been excellent, the text probably was more accessible to you as an adult.

That's the essence of text difficulty. Readers apply everything they know, at a point in time, to understanding a text. Text accessibility is always related to the individual reader's particular background. There are levels of understanding. Not every reader will take away the same meaning. But if we can select texts that have good potential for reader understanding, and if we can support readers' processing, we will be able to enrich their reading experiences. The process starts with "leveling" texts so that we know the supports and challenges we have to work with.

When we seek to determine readability, manageability, or the level of texts, we are matching characteristics of the text with aspects of the reading process. We are exploring this essential and critical question: *What does this text demand of the reader?* Don't be intimidated or overwhelmed with the number of factors there are to examine. Your examination will heighten your awareness of a text's demands on the students you teach. Reading a text is complicated; so is looking at the level of difficulty. As teachers, it helps us to know that as we look at texts, we are really thinking about readers. What knowledge and strategies will they need

in order to be able to read this text with understanding? What are the opportunities to learn? Leveling books sets us up for thinking about our instruction.

## Putting Knowledge of Text into Action

When we assign levels to books, we are looking at readability or accessibility across a broad range of text characteristics, as shown in Figure 4-1 (see also Chapter 3). The process requires reading the book and then analyzing it in several different ways that together represent the supports and challenges in the text. You can make your analyses more reliable by checking them with fellow teachers. You will find that you and your colleagues have excellent insight into the underlying difficulties of text. When you have read and discussed several books at a level, you will have a good sense of the composite of characteristics that make it more difficult or easier than the books at another level.

## Genre

The origin of the word *genre* is the French word meaning *type*. Genre refers to a classification system for categories of fiction and nonfiction that have similar characteristics. (For more specific information about genres, refer to Chapter 23 of Fountas and Pinnell, *Guiding Readers and Writers, Grades 3-6*.)

## FICTION

- *Traditional literature* includes stories that have been handed down orally through the ages. These stories have no known author; they include folk and fairy tales, myths, legends, and epics.
- *Fantasy* includes stories that have fantastic or unworldly elements; these stories are similar to traditional literature but have a known author. They are constructed so that the events, however fantas-

<sup>1</sup> Eliot, G. 1996. *Middlemarch*. New York: Barnes & Noble.

Factors Related to Text Difficulty	
Factor/Definition	Features to Examine
<p><i>Genre</i> Means "type" or "kind" and refers to a classification system formed to provide a way of talking about the characteristics of texts.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Each genre has characteristic features.</li> <li>❖ Fiction genres: traditional literature, fantasy, science fiction, realistic fiction, historical fiction.</li> <li>❖ Nonfiction genres: informational texts, biography, autobiography, memoir.</li> </ul>
<p><i>Text Structure</i> Refers to the way information is organized and presented. Fiction texts and biography are generally meant to be read from beginning to end because they have a narrative structure. But with nonfiction texts, the reader may skip to sections of interest because they are usually topically organized and may have sections, headings, and side headings.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Fiction: narration, development of plot; information given in heads; how characters are revealed; relevance of setting; use of literary devices such as flashbacks or changes in perspective; chapters that continue or chapters that stand alone.</li> <li>❖ Nonfiction: enumeration, established sequence, temporal sequence; description, compare/contrast, cause/effect, problem/solution; combination of structures. Structures are signaled by words that indicate patterns; for example, <i>first, second; while, yet; because, since, thus; conclude, the evidence is; furthermore.</i></li> </ul>
<p><i>Content</i> Refers to the subject matter that readers are required to understand.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Information on cover, and in chapter titles.</li> <li>❖ Topics.</li> <li>❖ Background knowledge required.</li> <li>❖ Information in graphics, titles, heads.</li> </ul>
<p><i>Themes and Ideas</i> Refers to the "big picture," the universality of the problem in the text and its relevance to peoples' lives.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Sophistication of themes (from simple everyday problems to issues requiring maturity).</li> </ul>
<p><i>Language and Literary Features</i> Refers to the writer's style and use of literary devices. Literary features are those elements typically used in literature to capture imagination, stir emotions, create empathy or suspense, and give readers a sense that characters and story are real.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Perspective.</li> <li>❖ Language structure and quality.</li> <li>❖ Word choice.</li> <li>❖ Literary devices.</li> <li>❖ Figurative language.</li> <li>❖ Dialogue—assigned (specifying character) or unassigned.</li> </ul>
<p><i>Vocabulary and Words</i> Refers to the words and their accessibility to readers. Vocabulary generally refers to the meaning of words that readers may decode but not understand. Word solving refers to the decoding process.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Multisyllable words.</li> <li>❖ Complex layers of meaning (as in metaphor).</li> <li>❖ Content/technical words.</li> <li>❖ Words particular to written rather than oral language.</li> </ul>
<p><i>Sentence Complexity</i> Refers to the syntactic patterns readers will encounter in the text; sentences may be simple (short, with one subject and predicate) or complex (longer, with embedded clauses).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Length of sentences.</li> <li>❖ Sentence style.</li> <li>❖ Embedded clauses.</li> </ul>

Figure 4-1. Factors Related to Text Difficulty

Factors Related to Text Difficulty (continued)	
Factor/ Definition	Features to Examine
<p><i>Book and Print Features</i></p> <p>Refers to the physical aspects of the text—what readers cope with in terms of length, size, spacing, and layout. It also refers to the illustrations and their function, as well as the relationship between the text and illustrations. It may refer to graphics if they are included.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Length of text, length of chapters.</li> <li>❖ Illustrations—placement and relation to text.</li> <li>❖ Punctuation.</li> <li>❖ Print size, style, and spacing (between words and lines).</li> <li>❖ Layout of print and illustrations, including format: columns, margins, white space, shading, sidebars, insets, bulleted and numbered lists. Also includes placement of phrases and line breaks, sentences that end on a page, or carry over to the next.</li> <li>❖ Graphic features such as diagrams, tables, graphs, drawings, illustrations and maps with legends.</li> <li>❖ Organizational features (such as indexes and glossaries).</li> </ul>

Figure 4-1. Factors Related to Text Difficulty (continued)

tic, seem believable within the world depicted. Sometimes fantasy is highly complex.

- *Science fiction* is fantasy that incorporates technology or scientific information. Some stories seek to provide a glimpse of the future or some time in the distant past. Others open up completely imaginary worlds.
- *Realistic fiction* includes stories that are true to life because they portray characters or events that could really exist in the here and now. Many stories reveal the human condition or probe social issues.
- *Historical fiction* includes stories that are realistic but take place at some time in the past. Stories are concerned with universal human problems and sometimes help readers understand historical events or current times.

### NONFICTION

- A *biography* is the story of a real person's life. Biographies may be authentic, or they may be fictionalized to create greater interest for readers. The degree to which a biography is fictionalized alters its authenticity.
- An *autobiography* is the story a person writes about his or her own life.
- A *memoir* is autobiographical writing that focuses on a particular event that had great impact on an

individual. A memoir may focus on another person.

- *Information books* focus on a science or social sciences discipline or on recreation—history, geography, sociology, the physical sciences. The reader derives content knowledge from informational texts.

### Text Structure

Text structure refers to the way information is organized and presented. A *narrative* is typically chronological, although flashbacks or flash-forwards may be used. Characters interact throughout a series of events related to an overall theme or themes. Lower-level texts have simple plots; plots become more complex as you move up the gradient of difficulty. Expository texts employ a variety of organizational structures: *cause and effect*, *temporal sequence*, *comparison/contrast*, *description*, *problem/solution*. These structures are often signaled by particular words, phrases, and headings. Structure aids coherence. Most writers work hard to show how parts fit within the whole, how one idea connects with another. A coherent text leads the reader to meaning.

### Content, Themes, and Ideas

A text is easier when it is close to the students' own experience. That's one reason narrative texts are the easiest for students to use in beginning reading.

Informational texts are more difficult because they usually provide information about something that the reader doesn't know. When looking at texts, think about what kind of background experiences your students will bring to the reading.

In learning to read, familiar content supports children's learning about print. As students move through the grades, however, they learn to take more information from the print and match it to their own funds of knowledge. They know enough about the print to use it as a tool for learning. If the content is too far from students' own background knowledge, simply decoding the words will not make the text understandable.

### ***Language and Literary Features***

Clarity of language is important whatever the genre. The sophistication of the language as well as the literary features contributes to the readability of a text. Early texts are generally simple narratives with a beginning, a middle, and an end. Higher-level texts have literary devices such as flashbacks or stories within stories. They also include idiom, dialect, literary language and poetic devices such as metaphor, simile, and onomatopoeia. The key here is that metaphor should contribute to understanding rather than confuse the reader. Managing the literary features of texts is built through experience.

### ***VOCABULARY AND WORDS***

Students may not know what certain words mean. In this case they must use a range of strategies to solve the word. Texts that have large numbers of unfamiliar words pose greater challenges. Alternatively, students may understand the words but not be able to decode them, because they've never seen them written down and aren't yet able to take them apart and link them to a known word in their vocabulary. In this case, a combination of strong decoding skills and the ability to use context is very helpful.

### ***SENTENCE COMPLEXITY***

A sentence's complexity has to do with its syntax, the way words are put together to form phrases and clauses. Shorter sentences usually have a single subject and predicate. Longer sentences may have compound or complex subjects and predicates, with many embedded clauses.

### ***Book and Print Features***

Book and print features are the physical aspects of the text. The way a text is laid out—font size, margins, spacing between words and lines, placement of phrases and sentences—can support the reader or make a text harder. If the features of a text work together to support the reader in constructing meaning, the text is more accessible.

### ***LENGTH***

In general, the longer the text, the more demanding it is. Chapters can be long or short. However, see the caveats relative to length discussed in the Chapter 3.

### ***PRINT***

The size and clarity of the print contribute to ease in reading. Ample space between words and between lines helps make the text friendly to the reader because it is easier to search for and pick up information. Print features such as italics, boldface, or a larger type size are used to signal meaning.

### ***ILLUSTRATIONS***

In narrative texts, illustrations help the reader form images of the setting and characters. They enhance the mood of the story, prompt emotional responses, and help the reader comprehend the meaning in a deeper way. In informational texts, illustrations (photographs, drawings, diagrams, maps, cross-sections) help students understand the concepts and ideas being discussed. Illustrations that are clearly related to the information in the text and that are themselves easy to understand assist the reader. Graphic features that are clearly labeled and explained through legends and keys are easier for readers to process and understand.

### ***LAYOUT***

The placement of print in space is a factor in helping readers find information. How the text appears on the page can make the text more "reader friendly." For example, look at the page from *Henry and Mudge and the Best Day of All* (Rylant 1997) shown in Figure 4-2. Even though the sentences are quite long, the layout helps the reader process the print. All sentences start at the left-hand margin rather than being run together. In contrast, when a new sentence continues in the middle of the line, the layout is slightly harder. A sentence that carries over to a new page introduces even more difficulty.

### ORGANIZATIONAL FEATURES

Paragraphs break up text into groups of ideas. Paragraphed text can be continuous and unbroken, or it can be organized into chapters, sections, or columns. For longer texts, the use of headings at logical breaks helps the reader gather and summarize meaning. The degree to which organizational aids are clearly laid out, meaningful, and available contributes to text manageability. The text may also have supports such as a glossary or index that allow the readers to access information quickly.

### PUNCTUATION

Punctuation is used to signal the meaning being delivered by the words and phrases as well as the relationship between ideas. As readers encounter longer and more complex sentences, punctuation helps them identify the units of meaning. More difficult texts require more sophisticated uses of punctuation. Simpler texts contain periods, commas, question marks, quotation marks, and exclamation marks; as the gradient increases,

readers encounter semicolons, dashes, ellipses, quotes within quotes, and the like.

### Putting Knowledge of Text into Action

Every text demands that readers:

- Use strategies to recognize and solve words.
- Orchestrate different sources of information in comprehending the text.
- Use the punctuation and sentence structure to identify phrase units.
- Monitor their reading to be sure it makes sense, looks right, and sounds right—and correct themselves when necessary to gain meaning.
- Recognize important elements of narrative (setting, plot, characters, perspective) and use them to anticipate, analyze, and understand the text.
- Recognize important informational structures

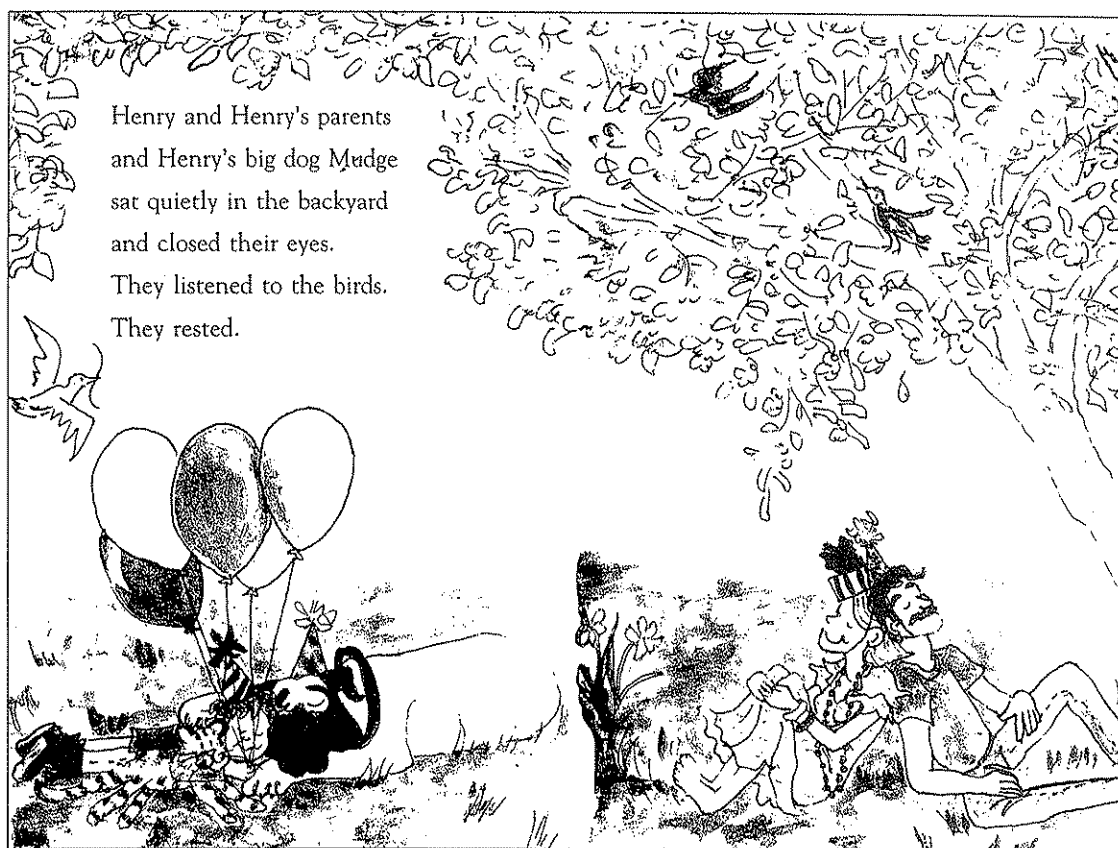


Figure 4-2. Page from *Henry and Mudge and the Best Day of All*

(compare/contrast, description, cause/effect, temporal sequence, problem/solution) and use them to anticipate, analyze, and understand the text.

- Sustain attention and memory over periods of time.
- Activate and use background knowledge and make personal and text connections.
- Revise their ideas as they take new ideas and information from the text.
- Recognize elements of the writer's craft.
- Think critically about the text, making judgments as to accuracy and quality.

The reading process is *not* a collection of discrete strategies that you use *one at a time*. You don't use some strategies on lower-level texts and others on higher-level texts. So, even though harder texts demand more of the reader, the requirements pertain to the depth and sophistication of strategies rather than to additional strategies. For example, in a simple, easy chapter book like *Henry and Mudge: The First Book* (Rylant 1990), readers are required to use background knowledge—relative to pets, family, dog collars—that most children have. It also requires readers to infer that Henry is lonely and afraid to walk to school alone, feelings most children understand. Nevertheless, the strategies required are the same as those required by highly sophisticated texts like *Number the Stars* (Lowry 1989), a story about the Holocaust.

Our goal in using a gradient of text is to provide a graduated “ladder” that leads to growth in the full range of strategies as students meet the demands of increasingly difficult and more complex texts.

### ***Thinking About Texts in Terms of Teaching***

As teachers we recognize that readers orchestrate the full range of strategies every time they read a high-quality text. Teachers' guides sometimes suggest that you can use a particular text to “teach inferencing” or to “teach visualizing.” It is simply not true that a text requires a single strategy or is the “best” text for teaching certain concepts. Complex strategies cannot be taught in one (or even ten!) lessons. Readers must use them again and again as an integrated part of the reading process they bring to many different texts. Some strategies will need to be introduced explicitly; others the students will discover and apply for themselves. Further, just because a reader can demonstrate a strate-

gy such as “inferencing” does not necessarily mean he has gained the full meaning of a text or can draw inferences from other texts.

Our job as teachers is, while keeping the reading process in mind, to see the potential in each text and decide what to call to students' attention. We have identified twelve broad, interrelated categories of strategies for processing text and expanding meaning (see Chapter 2; also see Fountas and Pinnell 2001). We always keep these strategies in mind as we look at texts and what they demand of readers.

Text analysis reveals the supports and challenges offered in a text. We then think, *What do my students need to do in order to read this text with fluency, understanding, and—we should not forget—some enjoyment!* After all, we want students to read voluntarily, and that will not happen if the experience is painful or boring day after day.

Our introductions to texts are derived from our analysis of the text characteristics. In the introduction, we “unlock” the text by providing the support students need to use the twelve categories of “in-the-head” strategies in an orchestrated way. We may demonstrate our own thinking to help students understand what they will need to do or how they'll need to think as they read the text. We may touch on one or several aspects of the text; we may bring one or several strategies to conscious attention. The challenge here is simultaneously to:

- Provide the information and support students need to read *this* text.
- Enable students to improve their reading by using strategies successfully.